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ABSTRACT

A Mississippi State University study investigated the perceptions of community and higher education leaders (N=197) concerning the potential socio-economic importance to Americans of establishing continuing links among communities, colleges and universities, and international students and alumni. Individuals surveyed include academic vice presidents, graduate and/or undergraduate deans, international student advisors, and alumni executives at public four-year colleges and universities in Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, and Tennessee and volunteer leaders elected annually and professional administrative staff in community leadership organizations such as chambers of commerce or convention and visitors' bureaus in the same states. Findings support the following conclusions: (1) while educational and community leaders agree on the professional and educational benefits and institutional and community benefits of such links, community leaders attach more importance to economic benefits than do academic leaders; (2) community leaders in Georgia and Tennessee appeared to be more enthusiastic than in the other two states about such links; and (3) both groups' perceptions of the importance of links appear to have been influenced most by prior international experience. Recommendations for action include development of more formal programs, cooperation in encouraging study abroad, and increases in the use of foreign students as classroom or counseling resources. The 77 community and higher education institutions participating are listed. (MSE)

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SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPORTANCE OF LINKS BETWEEN CAMPUSES,
COMMUNITIES, AND INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AND ALUMNI:
PERCEPTIONS OF COLLEGIATE AND COMMUNITY LEADERS

OFFICE OF INTERNATIONAL PROGRAMS
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Socio-Economic Importance of Links between Campuses,
Communities, and International Students and Alumni:
Perceptions of Collegiate and Community Leaders

Harold A. Smith

It has been claimed that Americans have strong negative perceptions of the governments of developing nations but still desire to improve relations with their people. A recent study for the Overseas Development Council surveyed 2,400 Americans, interviewed 500 additional Americans active in political or social issues, interviewed 13 members of Congress and Congressional staff, and held four group discussions in three cities around the country. A majority of the Americans participating in the study favored efforts to assist developing nations with socio-economic development. Nearly 75 percent of them also believed that our own economy is interrelated with those of developing nations[1].

Although that study found that American policy makers perceived public support for economic assistance to other nations as weak and fluctuating, a Fortune magazine article has contended that American community leaders had great interest in improving their international performance[2]. American colleges and universities, who frequently administer development programs and do research in developing countries, are also interested in the international arena. Many have special offices or centers that offer technical or logistical support to businesses, especially in their geographic service area[3]. At the same time that American businesses and campuses are looking beyond domestic borders, hundreds of thousands of international students and scholars, many of whom currently or subsequently occupy prominent positions of professional or public leadership, may be found in American institutions of higher learning; more than 356,000 international students are currently in the United States, most at their own expense[4].

A traditional model for support of the mostly post World War II flow of students from one country to another has been the "modernization model" of Third World development, which implies a one way transfer of benefit from developed to developing countries. "International exchange," another overlapping but distinct model for supporting the international educational flow of students, implies reciprocity of benefit and sharing of both costs and benefits, giving an overall net gain to both hosts and senders[5].

Grateful acknowledgement is made to Dr. Walter E. Sistrunk in the Department of Educational Leadership at Mississippi State University for directing the dissertation committee for the author's May, 1989 Doctor of Education degree, from which this report was taken. Thanks also to Dr. Ronald A. Brown, Director, and the staff of the Office of International Programs for their patience, encouragement and financial support.

Researchers studying international students have noted for more than 30 years that international alumni interests are not merely sentimental, but also are professional[6]. The alumni can assist, as well as be assisted by, universities and businesses in a variety of ways, such as: recruitment and orientation of prospective students, provision of specialized literature to departmental libraries, participation in research projects, making local and national-level contacts that could be beneficial to the college or university and to businesses and the wider community[7].

Communities, colleges, and universities in the United States which have hosted international scholars and students can be proud of their contributions to international education and development during an important period in history. After all, when international students enroll in a college or university, they become identified as a member of that institution, gaining from and contributing to it just as does any other student. From the moment of arrival the students, and thus the alumni, become extensions of the school, assuming the role of unofficial, sometimes even official, representatives abroad. The same is true for the community in which the international student lives while in the United States.

It may be primarily through their professional field that the international alumni continue to share in their alma mater's development. However, it is also through developing and maintaining mutually beneficial contacts that the alumni may serve as a link between foreign and American societies, thus contributing to the continuing socio-economic development of both nations. This study investigated perceptions of community and higher education leaders of the potential socio-economic importance to Americans of establishing continuing links among communities, colleges and universities, and international students and alumni.

PROCEDURE AND METHODOLOGY

The educational institutions selected included public four-year colleges and universities in four southeastern states: Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, and Tennessee. The community leadership organizations selected included chambers of commerce or similar organizations closest to each selected college or university (list attached).

The higher education respondents included Academic Vice Presidents, Graduate and/or Undergraduate Deans, International Student Advisors, and Alumni Executives. These leaders were selected as those most likely to have contact with international students and alumni in their institutions. Questionnaires were received from 153 higher education leaders in time for inclusion in the study.

Community respondents included volunteer leaders elected annually and professional administrative staff in chambers of commerce or convention and visitors bureaus. Questionnaires were received from 44 community leaders in time for inclusion in the study.

ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

The revised Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS[®]) was used to analyze the data gathered. The independent variables (respondents' institution type, state of residence, and prior international experience) were selected because of the importance each was likely to have on the dependent variables (respondents' perceptions of the socio-economic importance of links between communities, colleges and universities, and international students and alumni).

Multivariate analysis of variance was used for initial testing of four of the five research questions (relating to differences between leaders and states), followed by appropriate univariate testing when follow-up was called for by results of the multivariate analyses. Analysis of covariance was used to test the fifth research question to (the effect of international experience on leaders' perceptions).

FINDINGS

All 197 respondents favored establishing continuing links between communities, colleges and universities, and international students and alumni. The following sample of paraphrased comments by respondents illustrate their support, and indicate some of their reasons for supporting links.

The future of the earth depends on cooperative and creative solutions to environmental, agricultural, and economic issues facing us. Cooperative efforts are fostered by such international links. There is a growing international presence in the United States. It is critical that we understand the various cultures of the world so we might better communicate.

We are, after all, world citizens who need to communicate with each other for world peace. But links will directly benefit institutions as they seek to internationalize the curriculum, and to increase enrollment of self-supporting and/or sponsored international students. Some other possible benefits the United States may gain from such links include: the broadening of our perspectives; economic advancement; cultural and social understanding; exchange of information; cooperative research opportunities; and the strengthening of international relations.

The importance leaders placed on questionnaire items are shown below.

1. "It might be good for Americans to learn more about other cultures" (2.82).
2. "It might help U.S. students to have a more well-rounded education" (2.69).
3. "It might enhance the world-wide reputation of U.S. colleges/universities" (2.41).
4. "It might encourage more international students to seek a U.S. education" (2.39).
5. "It might strengthen the professional development of Americans" (2.35).
6. "It might help to promote beneficial trade relations for U.S. businesses" (2.35).
7. "It might help strengthen U.S. campus and business research programs" (2.33).
8. "It might strengthen the professional preparation of U.S. students" (2.31).
9. "It might help U.S. campuses to develop better educational programs" (2.23).
10. "It might be good for the economic development of nearby communities" (2.20).
11. "It might be good for the economic development of American campuses" (2.01).

"strongly disagree" = 0, "disagree" = 1, "agree" = 2, and "strongly agree" = 3

The items were found to relate to one another in the following three factors:

Professional and Educational Benefits.

Each person's responses on each of the items in this factor were averaged to form an individual's factor score. Individual factor scores were averaged to form an average factor score of 2.47 out of 3.

Institutional and Community Benefits.

The above procedure yielded an average factor score of 2.46 out of 3.

Economic Benefits.

The above procedure yielded an average factor score of 2.25 out of 3.

Analysis of the three factors representing potential benefits found[8]:

- a) Community leaders differed from higher education leaders in their perceptions of the socio-economic importance of establishing continuing links, both by position and by state of residence.
- b) Higher education leaders did not differ according to states.
- c) Community leaders in Georgia differed from other states.
- d) When examining the effect of prior international experience, the total "time outside the United States" showed a positive relationship with economic benefits. Both "total places visited" and "time outside the United States" showed a positive relationship with institutional and community benefits.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study supported the following conclusions:

- 1) There was agreement between the perceptions of the community leaders and the higher education leaders related to "professional and educational benefits" and "institutional and community benefits;" however, community leaders attached a higher level of importance to links than did higher education leaders on "economic benefits." This area of disagreement is an important indication of community leaders' interest in links with international students and alumni as a source of potential benefits to the local economy. It is also an indication that the community sector may be interested in cooperating with colleges and universities to develop stronger and more viable links between communities, colleges and universities, and international students and alumni.
- 2) There was disagreement among respondents from the various states in community leaders' perceptions of the importance of links. This disagreement is an indication that community leaders in Georgia and Tennessee may be more enthusiastic about the potential benefits of links than are those in Alabama and Mississippi.
- 3) Perceptions of the importance of links to community and higher education leaders

appeared to have been influenced most by prior international experience, i.e., total number of international places visited and total amount of time spent outside the United States. This influence indicates that the length and breadth of international experience may be major determiners of leaders' attitudes toward the potential benefits of links.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that college and university leaders initiate efforts to cooperate with chambers of commerce and other community entities to develop and sustain formal programs that will promote opportunities for community and higher education personnel to meet and build relationships with international students during their time in the United States, and provide the basis for continued relations after the alumni leave the host institution and return to their home countries. This study found that community and higher education leaders do not agree on the potential economic benefits that may accrue from the development of continuing links between communities, colleges and universities, and international students and alumni. Instead, community leaders ($M=26.24$) apparently regard the potential benefits of such links more highly than did higher education leaders ($M=26.09$). Currently, only approximately 30 percent of American colleges and universities have formal programs for developing such links[9].

It is also recommended that communities, colleges, and universities seek ways to cooperate to encourage students in other countries to study in the United States. This study supported the literature which suggested that exchanges enhance the balance-of-payments position of the country in which international students pursue their higher education, both because they spend money in it while there and because they favor the country in commercial and other relationships in which they may be involved professionally on returning home[10]. Most international students are also self-supporting rather than receiving financial support from either their home or the U.S. government[11]. A basic reason mentioned in the literature and by respondents for encouraging students from other countries to pursue their studies in the United States is that many, if not most, of them may be expected to become leaders in their home countries and constitute a network of intellectuals who are familiar with American life and values even though they may not support them. This study is also congruent with the concepts found in the literature that students' positive experiences in the host country contribute to mutual understanding, peace, and world stability[12].

It is further recommended that colleges and universities increase the use of international students as resources in classrooms or as academic counseling resources in order to capitalize on their unique perspectives, experiences, and abilities to better prepare all postsecondary students in the United States. This study is congruent with the concepts

in the literature that suggested the need to recognize the importance of international cooperation in research, not only for serving the national economic and political interest but also as a means of meeting long-term needs for intellectual competence in understanding various cultures in the world around us[13].

It is also recommended that further research be conducted to determine the impact of international students on the socio-economic development of the United States.

Further research should also be conducted to determine the impact of international experience on the perceptions of community and higher education leaders. The colleges and universities involved in this study should pursue self-studies of the level of formal continuing contacts they have with their international alumni, and use the data gained to develop or strengthen such links.

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PARTICIPATING INSTITUTIONS

Community Institutions

Alabama: Calhoun County Chamber of Commerce
 Athens-Limestone County Chamber of Commerce
 Auburn Chamber of Commerce
 Birmingham Area Chamber of Commerce
 Huntsville Convention and Visitors Bureau
 Mobile Area Chamber of Commerce
 Montgomery Chamber of Commerce
 Scottsboro-Jackson County Chamber of Commerce
 Pike County Chamber of Commerce
 Georgia: Albany Chamber of Commerce
 Athens Area Chamber of Commerce
 Atlanta Chamber of Commerce
 Augusta-Richmond County Convention and Visitors Bureau
 Greater Augusta Chamber of Commerce
 Columbus Convention and Visitors Bureau
 Carroll County Chamber of Commerce
 Dahlonega-Lumpkin County Chamber of Commerce
 Peach County Chamber of Commerce
 Valdosta-Lowndes County Chamber of Commerce
 Mississippi: Cleveland-Bolivar County Chamber of Commerce
 Columbus-Lowndes County Chamber of Commerce
 Hattiesburg Area Chamber of Commerce
 Jackson Chamber of Commerce
 Starkville Chamber of Commerce
 Tennessee: Partners for Economic Progress, Inc. (Chattanooga)
 Clarksville Area Chamber of Commerce
 Cookeville Chamber of Commerce
 Weakley County Chamber of Commerce
 Johnson City-Washington County Chamber of Commerce
 Memphis Convention and Visitors Bureau
 Donelson-Hermitage Chamber of Commerce

Higher Education Institutions

Alabama: Alabama Agricultural and Mechanical University
 Alabama State University
 Athens State College
 Auburn University
 Auburn University at Montgomery
 Jacksonville State University
 Livingston University
 Troy State University Main Campus
 University of Alabama
 University of Alabama at Birmingham
 University of Alabama in Huntsville
 University of Montevallo
 University of North Alabama
 University of South Alabama
 Georgia: Albany State College
 Armstrong State College
 Columbus College
 Fort Valley State College
 Georgia Institute of Technology
 Georgia Southern College
 Georgia Southwestern College
 Georgia State University
 Kennesaw State College
 Medical College of Georgia
 North Georgia College
 Savannah State College
 Southern College of Technology
 University of Georgia
 Valdosta State College
 West Georgia College
 Mississippi: Alcorn State University
 Delta State University
 Jackson State University
 Mississippi State University
 Mississippi University for Women
 Mississippi Valley State University
 University of Mississippi
 University of Southern Mississippi
 Tennessee: Austin Peay State University
 East Tennessee State University
 Memphis State University
 Middle Tennessee State University
 Tennessee Technological University
 University of Tennessee,
 Chattanooga
 University of Tennessee, Martin
 University of Tennessee, Memphis